



Organization of American States

www.oas.org

Press Release

(E-152/01)

July 16, 2001

OAS FORUM DISCUSSES BUILDING DEMOCRACY FROM THE GRASSROOTS

Effectively incorporating civil society into local life is one of the best ways to boost social capital and build a solid democratic political culture, according to Elizabeth Spehar, executive coordinator of the Organization of American States (OAS) Unit for the Promotion of Democracy.

Spehar made the remarks at a daylong UPD forum on Building Democracy from the Grassroots, at OAS Headquarters Monday. The event was a collaborative effort of the UPD and the Inter-American Foundation.

The UPD executive coordinator views the fostering of civil society participation at the local level as "an anchor by which democracy will permanently take root in the Americas." She also noted that "a veritable revolution" was taking place, with non-profit organizations of ordinary citizens making a difference. Spehar also spoke about the OAS' first ever meeting of ministers and high-level authorities responsible for decentralization policies, local government and citizen participation in the Hemisphere, slated for La Paz, Bolivia from July 29 to 31.

Prof. Lester M. Salamon of Johns Hopkins University's Center for Civil Society Studies delivered the keynote address to the democracy forum. He focused on "The Third Sector in Global Perspective."

In another presentation, Jamaican Professor Neville C. Duncan, Director of the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, called for a revitalized local government—"one that works with all the other non-state actors, business, labor [and] grassroots organizations, non-governmental organizations and voluntary groups such as churches... to work out a new form of community governance."

He argued for a new relationship involving three key sectors—state, local government and new social sectors. The latter, he insisted, are not yet properly organized to speak with a powerful voice. "But they are a rapidly emerging feature of Caribbean societies."

Topics on the agenda for the forum included: democracy, decentralization and local government; building local alliances; challenges and opportunities; and experiences in building democracy from the grassroots.

General Secretariat of the Organization of American States
Department of Public Information
17th St. & Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, DC, 20006
Telephone: (202) 458-6386 Fax: (202) 458-6421
On the Internet: WWW.OAS.ORG E-Mail: pi@oas.org



more

Among the experiences cited was the case of the municipality of Nejapa, El Salvador. As explained by Inter-American Foundation President David Valenzuela, a novel partnership involving the mayor's office, a community association and two private sector firms established a development fund into which private companies contributed. In the process, some critical problems were redressed, including inadequate housing and deforestation. "There is a question of understanding what is the common good," he declared.

El Salvador's Ambassador to the OAS, Margarita Escobar, introduced the Nejapa mayor and the other representatives who related the success story of the Salvadorian municipality in building democracy from the grassroots.
